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ABSTRACT

The branches of experiential education are many, but they all derive from a common philosophy and approach to learning that values hands-on experiences and centers on the learner. Encouraging the broader implementation of experiential learning requires that the field be interpreted to initiates down to its roots. In the case of whole-school change, a critical mass of staff must not only understand not only how to carry out experiential strategies, but also believe in the principles and grounding philosophy. The story of Fullerton Elementary in Baltimore County, Maryland, demonstrates the successful implementation of experiential education starting with the whole-school adoption of its principles. Important elements in the school's adoption of experiential principles included crafting and refining a mission statement; teacher acceptance and participation promoted through team-building activities, peer coaching, and teacher-developed staff development sessions; parent involvement in school activities and in the school improvement team; and student involvement in experiential activities and community service. Fullerton's experiential approach has produced many positive changes, including improved student learning and test scores and improved school attitude among both students and teachers. (Author/SV)

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The Woods and the Trees: Interpreting Experiential Education for Schools and a Greater Audience

ED 414 124

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ABSTRACT

The branches of experiential education are many, but they all derive from a common philosophy and approach to learning that values hands-on experiences and centers on the learner. Encouraging the broader implementation of experiential learning requires that the field be interpreted to initiates down to its roots. In the case of whole school change, a critical mass of staff must understand not only how to carry out experiential strategies, but believe in the principles and grounding philosophy. The success of Fullerton Elementary in Baltimore County, Maryland, demonstrates the successful implementation of experiential education starting with the whole-school adoption of its principles.

Introduction (J. Allen)

Believing in experiential education with a passion leads naturally to advocating for its implementation so that more and more people can share in its benefits and enjoyment. But just as Eliot Wigginton found that transference of the methods of cultural journalism does not assure success, the mere promulgation of experiential lessons and strategies does not an experiential education make. An experiential program is like a tree—it cannot be transplanted without a strong root system and expected to thrive.

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Yet it is no small matter to transplant a sapling or sow a seed and see it to full fruition year after year. The soil must be suitable, the sunshine plentiful, and the caretaker willing to devote years of care. In the same way, developing an experiential organization or school requires that the climate and conditions are ready so that a program can flourish. Additionally, each root must be in touch with every person affected by the program so that all involved feel included, that their input matters. Then with such a strong root system, the tree (the program) can withstand buffets and assaults because the roots (the grounding philosophy) are established.

Whenever I try to implement a project or program, I keep in mind two lessons from Japanese management. The first is called root-binding, taken from the example of gardening. When a tree is being moved, it cannot be simply pulled up such that important roots are broken off and then replanted. It will not survive for long without its conduits for water and nourishment. Therefore, before lifting, each root is traced to its end and gently brought to the main trunk. Then when all roots have been sought out and included, the tree can be safely lifted, balled, and then replanted where it will again establish itself, grow, and bear fruit.

The second principle involves patience in seeing the fruits of one's labors. There is a tale about the founder of the Sony company. When he began his fledgling business, he gave himself a certain number of years to make a profit. We all know that startup costs are high and the obstacles and setbacks can be numerous. How many years did he give himself? Ten! What do Americans allow before they fire the president or new superintendent or manager? Probably three years at the most. It did take Sony about ten years but those profits indeed grew even more. It takes time and patient determination, to keep at a project, to work through difficulties, in order to realize our goals.

The Roots of Experiential Education

The question may arise as to "what are the roots?" — the essence of experiential education that we so much want to establish? One approach to finding these out would be to examine the many expressions of experiential education, what I like to call components of the field. These are fields of education whose practitioners, when told a brief description of experiential education, will say, "Why, that's what I do!" These branches of experiential education can be arranged in the following taxonomy.

Outdoor Components
- Adventure education
- Outdoor recreation
- Environmental education

Indoor Components
- Community-based education
- Service learning
- Internships, apprenticeships, mentoring
- Adult education
- Creative and expressive arts

Classroom Components
- Project approach
- Cooperative learning
- Writer's workshop
- Whole language

Each of these twelve "branches" of experiential education can be differentiated from the others. They all are unique and have their own myriad professional groups. Those who are committed enough to help organize and promote their particular fields often do it with a passion, sometimes without appreciating their connection to other branches.

By examining closely each of the components of experiential education, we can glean what the commonalities are, what it is that prompts practitioners from seemingly disparate branches to say that they practice experiential education. These results can provide us with the essence of the

field, what I have been calling the roots from which authentic praxis grows. *(Possible workshop activity: gallery brainstorming and/or jigsaw from cooperative learning structures)*

A second approach to get down to the real roots of experiential education would be for those of us who are devotees to simply look at our own belief systems that determine how we practice our professions and live our lives. These are our own guiding principles that help us to walk our talk. There will be variations in what we may list, but the process of distillation and reduction to the most common elements would result, I predict, in the roots of our practice. *(Possible workshop activity: Think individually, compare with a partner, then share with another pair — Think, Pair, Share, Square.)*

I list here my own beliefs, many of which are expressed by succinct sayings.

- "Where there is teaching there is not always learning. Where there is learning there is not always teaching."
- "Where there is schooling there is not always education. Where there is education, there is not always schooling."
- "Where there is experiential education, there is not always experiential learning. Where there is experiential learning, there is not always experiential education."
- "You don't learn what you already know."
- The joy is in the learning.
- Doing and experience are not the same thing.
- Whole learning involves the mind, body, emotions, and spirit.
- We need to teach our passions.
- The bottom line of experiential education is the development of whole persons.
- Becoming ourselves requires freedom to be.
- Permanent change takes a long view because you are affecting a way of thinking.
- There is a whole person in each of us waiting to be freed and allowed to develop.
- We are facilitators of learning, midwives to our learners.
- Intuition is less deceiving than our intellects.

A third activity that may be used to help determine the essence of experiential education would be to solicit the help of the audience. They would be primed to be ready to jot down quickly any thoughts and descriptors that they associate with the phrase "experiential education." As in the above approaches, the common meanings can be pooled, refined, and distilled.

The following section will show how the process of first "getting down to the roots" helped experiential education to work in a school setting.

The Story of Fullerton School (J. Hutchinson)

Experiential education as a way of thinking and teaching at Fullerton School in Baltimore County, Maryland, started about ten years ago. It has its own unique history and has evolved through the years to become an accepted set of beliefs and practices. Let's see how it began, some of its travels, and where it is today.

Believe in Something!

About ten years ago, I signed up for an in-service course — *Introduction to Experiential Education.* The course was taught by JoAnna Allen and took place in Bucks Harbor, Maine. It was a course of "back to the land, back to our hands." We gathered our own food when it was possible (blueberries, mussels, periwinkles), cooked over an open fire, slept in a tree house (climbing up was the scary part), and discovered what it was like to be learners. We worked and learned together as a team — really a wonderful team! Hey, we were "learning by doing" and having fun doing it.

Returning from Maine, I realized I had stumbled onto something natural to me. I had always learned best by doing and now I was rediscovering what I had always known but had covered over with many years of education. I now had something, a set of educational values I could passionately believe in. John Dewey's "Learning by doing" and Kurt Hahn's "On this journey we are

a crew, not passengers" were phrases that gave real meaning to my educational life. I had found what I needed to be a more effective principal — a belief system of learning by doing and teamwork. I had discovered experiential education. I believed in this passionately and it changed my life. School would never be the same again.

Put It in Words: Craft a Mission Statement

After the summer course in Maine, I was excited to put this belief system into practice. In meeting with my School Improvement Team of teachers and parents, we talked about our past and our most exciting moments in education. We agreed that most of our good times in school occurred when we were meaningfully and actively involved and learning by doing. The Team bought the idea of "learning by doing" and experiential education. They were ready to write a school mission statement.

The Fullerton Mission Statement focused on children "participating more than spectating," "learning by doing," and being involved in meaningful and authentic learning activities. Our Mission Statement ran for three pages and gave guidance to our work. Our Mission Statement was good but we still had difficulty explaining it to our public.

After some time had passed, I had the opportunity to attend the 1993 AEE Conference at Smugglers Notch — and what a wonderful conference it was for good ideas. I met Steven Levy who showed the ultimate in what an experiential learning classroom could look like. I also attended a session on condensing your mission statement, just what I needed to hear.

After this conference session, I couldn't wait to return to school to work on condensing our Mission Statement. In a meeting with our teachers, we examined our Mission Statement for a list of words that occurred most frequently and expressed what we were about as a school. Next, this long list

was condensed to six key words: HANDS-ON, MEANINGFUL, AUTHENTIC, CLASSROOM, COMMUNITY, and OUTDOORS.

Now we had it! We had words we could use to more easily explain to our public what we were all about. This six-word list also helped our teachers as it gave our instructional program more focus. In time we found our test scores rising and our behavior problems decreasing. Our students really wanted to be in school. As a final touch to help our communication process, we expanded our six words into a sentence:

Fullerton Mission Statement

We will teach our children to *know* skills, content, and thinking processes and *apply* that knowledge in the context of *hands-on, meaningful, authentic* learning experiences in the *classroom, community,* and *outdoors.*

Build a Team: The Teachers

Good ideas in themselves are not enough. We needed to forge a team of teachers, parents, and students to make our Mission Statement come to life. We began by making our first day back at school a day of some adventure, some risk, and a day to live our Mission Statement beliefs. We learned by doing and being a team with hands-on, meaningful, authentic learning experiences in the schoolhouse, community, and outdoors. Over the years, our first day back at school took us to a ropes course, sailing, canoeing, a local park, our zoo, and into the community to explore local resources. This last adventure was what one of our teachers calls "two bucks and a task." Each teacher was given $2.00 and asked to join a team of three other teachers in exploring a section of our community for a day to find community resources. At the end of the day, teachers told how they interviewed parents who were shocked to see

them out in the community, found people who could be resources for our school, pooled their financial resources ($2.00 each) to live and eat for the day. They also brought back artifacts from their day of exploration — a sketch of a local church, a brick from the hardware store that specialized in selling a variety of bricks, and so much more. A day that started with some trepidation ended in many laughs and good feelings.

Teamwork with the faculty also found its way to every faculty meeting. Each meeting always started with a team-building activity and the serving of food. The heart of the meeting was staff development; typically, one of our teachers shared a "best practice." The meetings usually took place in a circle — a symbolic way of saying we were "one." This sure beat teachers looking at the back of each other's heads.

The teamwork really carried into our professional development activities. Teachers chose peer coaches who could give them feedback as a "critical friend." The teachers, sensing a need for additional staff development, developed their own special day once a month called "First Thursdays." Attendance was optional, but usually most of the staff showed up! They were more than a team; they were a family. They really cared for one another, the students, and their professional growth. Teachers lived and practiced their craft by TCC — Teaching, Caring, and Communicating. These three words, put into practice, made our school a place where students, parents, and teachers wanted to be. We were living by the belief, "As individuals we are incomplete. As a team we are a force" (Craig Imler).

Build the Team: Parents

Three forces must always work together to make an effective school — students, teachers, and parents. At the beginning of the school year at our annual back-to-school night, I always said to our parents, "Thank you for send-

ing us your wonderful children to teach." It was an honor to be entrusted with these wonderful children, and parents liked hearing that we valued and wanted their children. That helped get our year off to a good start.

Communication, which was part of our Teaching-Caring-Communication belief system, really helped the parents not only be part of our team but strong advocates of our Mission Statement as well. We believed that parents should be "fully informed and fully involved." Parents received my principal's bulletin every other week and a teacher bulletin once a month. We wanted parents to always know what was going on. We believed our bulletins made our parents smarter, which in turn made our children smarter. Our parents wanted to become active players in our school and fully participated as volunteers and as a PTA. Each year, we found at least 100 parents spending time in the building working with children and helping teachers in some way. We often saw mothers at work in the school with babies in strollers. Sometimes we found these little ones tottering down the hall surrounded by our students. Parents felt the school was part of their family.

Our School Improvement Team was essential in making our Mission Statement come to life. We met once a month and began with a team-building activity and refreshments. Having fun at the beginning of these meetings made it easier to talk about tough issues once the meeting got underway. We felt as though we were a family, planning and solving family problems. Our meeting behavior and decision-making were guided by three key words — consensus, collaboration, and no-fault. We learned to talk through issues, collaborate, reach a consensus, and not point fingers or find fault when things didn't work. Parents serving on the Team enjoyed their tenure as they were meaningfully involved. We took turns facilitating, recording, and planning team-building activities. We believed in having fun as we worked. "Thank you

for sending us your wonderful children to teach," was also a wonderful way for us to end our year with our parents.

Build the Team: Students

I am talking about the students last, but they were always "first in all of our deliberations." Our behavior and decisions were always guided by the question: "Is this good for children?" The students — that is where our Mission Statement came to life. We wanted students to "participate more than spectate," and they did. Our students ran the school store and learned to survey the school to find out what supplies people wanted, do an advertising campaign to drum up business, order from vendors, take inventory, count change, and figure taxes. Wow, they were good! Our students also did the school yearbook. It was always interesting to watch a yearbook vendor's face when he realized he was going to be interviewed by a couple of fifth-grade students.

In planning their instructional program to meet state requirements, teachers had students find real problems to solve or ways they could be involved in community service projects. Some youngsters wrote "living biographies" of the senior citizens in our community. Others led a campaign for a new playground and raised $15,000 for it to be built. One third-grade girl this past year wanted a swing set added to the playground. She wrote letters and met with county officials. The swing set was added this past summer. One group of students approached the PTA for a loan to purchase herb seeds and lumber to build a plant stand. They built the plant stands and then grew herbs indoors. The herbs were later put on sale, and were used to repay the PTA for their loan. Third graders, in their study of Baltimore, researched and created family trees as part of their efforts to document why their families had located in the Baltimore area. Fifth grade students researched why peo-

ple wanted to live in the Fullerton community and produced a booklet on this. This booklet is now being used by a local real estate office to show why people want to live in our community.

Our students are actively involved in other ways as well: a second-grade class went overnight camping and took a nighttime canoe ride (scared the daylights out of the principal), fifth graders went camping for three nights (which was the highlight of their year and for their parents as well), and our school just purchased a sailboat and had a climbing wall installed in the gym. It really is better to have the students "participating more than spectating."

Results

Fullerton School has had outstanding success in all areas of academic achievement. Results on grade three and five state tests showed:

- Fullerton made more growth than any other Baltimore County School since the baseline year of testing in 1993
- Fullerton met all the rigorous state standards at grade three
  – the only school to do so in the county
  – one of four schools in the state to meet these standards
  – of the six standards met, four were at the "excellent" level
- Fullerton improved in five of six standards at grade five
- Overall, Fullerton improved in eleven out of twelve standards
- The gender gap closed significantly (boys greatly improved) making a major impact on test scores.

Conclusion

Our experiential education approach to teaching and learning brought about many positive changes at Fullerton School in Baltimore County, Maryland. One obvious change was the improvement in student learning and test scores. Another positive change was in school attitude. Not only did our students enjoy coming to school, but our teachers had more fun teaching.

Fullerton School began with a strong, well-considered foundation of beliefs and experiential philosophy on the part of principal, staff, and parents. These were the roots from which programming grew. Even with a change of principals, the roots are now established such that experiential education should continue to thrive at Fullerton.

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